



**Election Reform in Detroit:  
New Voting Technology and Increased Voter Education  
Significantly Reduced Uncounted Ballots**

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**Prepared for Rep. Henry A. Waxman  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2000 election revealed that many voters who go to the polls have their votes discarded. In fact, according to experts, approximately 2% of the ballots cast in the last election were not counted in the presidential race. This is equivalent to almost 2 million votes for president.

Commentators and election experts have expressed different opinions over whether it is possible to significantly reduce the number of uncounted ballots and, if so, how to achieve this result. Some urge banning older voting machines, such as punch-card machines. Others argue that voter irresponsibility -- not voting machines -- causes uncounted ballots. These differing views have caused confusion about what should be done to reform elections. Some observers doubt that significant improvements can be made.

Rep. Henry A. Waxman, the ranking member of the Committee on Government Reform, requested this report to examine whether it is possible to reduce the rate of uncounted ballots. The report is a case study of voting results in a major city, Detroit, that recently made substantial efforts to reduce the number of uncounted ballots. Detroit has the highest poverty rate of any U.S. city, as well as one of the highest minority populations. This makes Detroit a good case study of whether it is possible to reduce voter undercounts.

In the 1996 presidential election, Detroit voters used punch-card machines to cast their votes. In 1998, Detroit replaced its punch-card voting system with an optical scan system that allows voters to check their ballots before leaving the polling station. Detroit also engaged in a city-wide voter education effort to inform voters about the new technology and teach them how to use it. To assess the impact of these changes on voter undercounts, this report analyzed precinct-level results for Detroit for the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections.

The case study revealed that it is possible to achieve dramatic reductions in voter undercounts. Specifically, the investigation found:

- **The percentage of uncounted ballots in Detroit decreased significantly in the 2000 election.** The percentage of uncounted votes for president in Detroit decreased by almost two-thirds, from over 50% above the national average in the 1996 election to almost 50% below the national average in the 2000 election. In the 1996 election, 3.1% of ballots cast in Detroit were not counted in the presidential race. In 2000, only 1.1% of ballots cast were not counted in the presidential race.
- **The decrease was across-the-board and especially significant in precincts with high rates of uncounted ballots in 1996.** Detroit reduced the percentage of uncounted votes for president all across the city. Every election district in Detroit had a smaller percentage of uncounted votes in the 2000 election than in the 1996 election. The reduction in the undercount was especially large in precincts with high rates of uncounted votes in 1996. Precincts that had over 7% uncounted votes for president in 1996 had less than 1% uncounted votes in 2000.

- **Even Detroit districts with increased turnout had low rates of uncounted ballots.**  
The election districts that have a high number of inexperienced or infrequent voters are often the districts with increased turnout. In Detroit, even these districts experienced a substantial reduction in the percentage of votes for president that were discarded. For example, in the 18th election district in Detroit, turnout increased by over 1,000 voters between 1996 and 2000, while the rate of uncounted votes for president decreased from 2.9% to 0.8%.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 2000 election revealed that millions of votes are discarded every presidential election. Sometimes, this may be because the voter intentionally did not vote for a candidate or intentionally voted for two candidates. More often, however, it is because the system fails to accurately record the intention of the voter. Experts estimate that 1.9% of all ballots cast in the 2000 election were not counted in the presidential race.<sup>1</sup> This is equivalent to almost two million votes for president.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequent investigations discovered that the problem of uncounted ballots seems to be concentrated in disadvantaged communities. The Washington Post uncovered vast differences in Chicago: “in many black precincts in Chicago, one of every six ballots in the presidential election was thrown out,” but in suburban precincts, almost every vote was counted.<sup>3</sup> In a report about Florida, the Washington Post revealed that “[a]s many as one in three ballots in black sections of Jacksonville . . . did not count in the presidential contest,” four times as many as in predominately white precincts.<sup>4</sup> The Columbus Dispatch reported that “[v]oters in Ohio’s poorest counties are least likely to have their votes for president counted.”<sup>5</sup>

Election officials, academics, and politicians offered a variety of explanations of the problem and proposed a range of solutions. Many blamed the punch-card machinery and proposed banning it.<sup>6</sup> Others argued that punch-cards should not be blamed, but instead centrally-tabulated balloting systems.<sup>7</sup> Still others argued that equipment is not the problem,

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<sup>1</sup>Georgia Secretary of State Cathy Cox, *The 2000 Election: A Wake-Up Call for Reform and Change*, Report to the Governor and Members of the General Assembly, 3 (Jan. 2001).

<sup>2</sup>Times Staff Writers, *A ‘Modern’ Democracy that Can’t Count Votes; Special Report: What Happened in Florida is the Rule and Not the Exception. A Coast-to-Coast Study by the Times Finds Shoddy System that Can Only be Trusted When the Election Isn’t Close*, Los Angeles Times (Dec. 11, 2000).

<sup>3</sup>John Mintz and Dan Keating, *A Racial Gap in Voided Votes; Precinct Analysis Finds Stark Inequity in Polling Problems*, Washington Post (Dec. 27, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>John Mintz and Dan Keating, *Florida Ballot Spoilage Likelier for Blacks; Voting Machines, Confusion Cited*, Washington Post (Dec. 3, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>Darrel Rowland, *Many Votes Uncounted in Ohio’s Poor Areas*, Columbus Dispatch (Dec. 17, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>Editorial, *Kissing the Chad Goodbye*, Los Angeles Times (Mar. 3, 2001) (“[The punch-card machine] should be replaced as soon as a practical alternative machine is agreed upon.”).

<sup>7</sup>Michael Griffin, *Don’t Expect Sweeping Election Reform*, Orlando Sentinel (Feb. 26, 2001) (noting that members of the Florida election task force “concluded the problem was that . .

pointing out that there are often vast differences between areas using the same machines.<sup>8</sup> Some commentators suggested that “poverty pocket[s] with a poorly-educated or transient populace” cause high undercount rates.<sup>9</sup> But others argued that demographics do not explain the error rate.<sup>10</sup>

These differing opinions have caused doubts about what is needed to improve elections and, indeed, about whether any reforms will work at all. One editorial mused: “cooler heads may . . . conclude that the system is as good, if not better, than any supposed improvement.”<sup>11</sup>

## II. PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

Given the confusion about whether the incidence of uncounted ballots can be reduced, Rep. Henry A. Waxman, the ranking member of the Committee on Government Reform, asked the Special Investigations Division of the minority staff to conduct a case study of an area that had tried to reduce undervotes. Detroit was chosen for the case study because it had recently changed its voting machinery and engaged in a voter education campaign. Detroit was also chosen because it has the demographic characteristics that experts believe are prone to large undercount rates: high poverty levels and a high minority population. Detroit has the highest poverty rate of any U.S. city, with 32% of the population living below the poverty line.<sup>12</sup> Detroit also has one of the nation’s highest minority populations, with African-Americans comprising 76% of the population. The goal of the case study was to determine whether Detroit’s election reform was successful in reducing the number of uncounted ballots.

To evaluate the effectiveness of Detroit’s efforts to reduce undervotes, the study examined the results from the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections in Detroit. These are the presidential elections immediately preceding and immediately following Detroit’s election reform efforts. The Special Investigations Division obtained detailed precinct-level results of

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. central tabulation systems do not allow voters the chance to correct their mistakes”).

<sup>8</sup>Editorial, *Don’t Add to Window for Voting Fraud*, Atlanta Journal (Mar. 12, 2001) (“[A] study by Secretary of State Cathy Cox showed vast differences between counties using the same systems, so that the technologically advanced opti-scan system produced an 0.6 percent undervote in Cobb County, but an 18.8 percent undervote in Ben Hill.”).

<sup>9</sup>Phil Kent, *Augusta’s Vote Foul-Up Rate Three Choices*, Augusta Chronicle (Mar. 18, 2001).

<sup>10</sup>Jim Wooten, *The Biggest Problem: Georgia Needs to Establish a System of Voter Integrity*, Atlanta Journal (Jan. 5, 2001) (pointing out that the demographics of one high error rate community did not match demographics of areas purported to have high error rates).

<sup>11</sup>Editorial, *Careful on Electoral Reform*, The Providence Journal (Feb. 8, 2001).

<sup>12</sup>1990 Census Data, S.T.F. 3.

Detroit's election from Wayne County election officials and compared the number of uncounted ballots in 1996 and 2000.<sup>13</sup> In addition to analyzing election returns, interviews were conducted with Detroit election officials about the city's voter education efforts.

It should be noted that this report addresses only one part of election administration: reducing ballot undercounts. Election administration involves many other important aspects such as voter registration and ensuring an adequate number of polling places to avoid lengthy delays. This study does not examine these aspects of Detroit's election administration.

### **III. FINDINGS**

#### **A. Detroit's Election Reforms**

In 1998, after years of problems with high rates of uncounted ballots, Detroit decided to make reforms to reduce the number of ballots that are uncounted in elections. Detroit replaced the punch-card machines that it had been using with an optical scanning machine that allows voters to check their ballots at the polling place. With this new system, voters in the 2000 election were able to insert their ballot into a machine that would tell them whether they had overvoted for any offices. If voters made errors, they were allowed to try again.

In addition to changing voting technology, Detroit also engaged in an extensive voter education campaign, spending almost \$100,000 to introduce Detroit voters to the new system. First, election officials demonstrated how to use the machine in community centers, churches, festivals, government buildings, and other public places. Detroit election officials did not keep records of how many times they demonstrated the machine; however, at the start of their efforts, they were demonstrating it almost every day. Next, Detroit took out public service advertisements on television, radio, and billboards informing voters about the new system. Finally, election officials blanketed the city with flyers and pamphlets to explain how to use the optical scanning machine.

#### **B. Uncounted Ballots in Detroit Were Significantly Reduced in the 2000 Presidential Election**

The case study found that the new voting machines and the increased efforts to educate voters made a dramatic difference, significantly decreasing the number of votes that were not counted in the presidential election in Detroit.

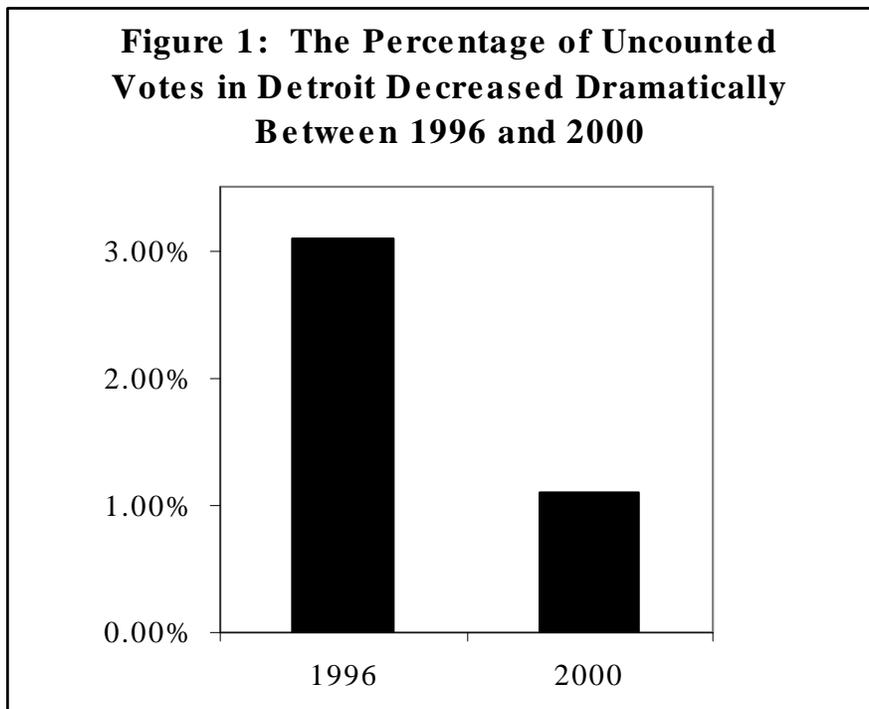
##### **1. The Number of Uncounted Ballots Decreased Significantly in the 2000 Election**

In the 1996 election, 3.1% of the ballots cast (9,628 of 309,036) were not counted in the presidential race. In the 2000 election, the percentage of uncounted ballots decreased by almost

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<sup>13</sup>Wayne County, where Detroit is located, maintains the records of Detroit's election results.

two-thirds. In 2000, only 1.1% of the ballots cast (3,297 of 303,775) were not counted in the presidential race (Figure 1). Experts estimate that nationwide approximately 2% of ballots are not counted in presidential elections. Accordingly, Detroit went from being over 50% above the national average in 1996 to being almost 50% below the national average in 2000.



**2. The Improvement Occurred in Every Election District**

Detroit voters experienced an across-the-board reduction in the rate of uncounted ballots. There are 24 election districts in Detroit, and the percentage of uncounted ballots decreased in every one of these districts. The biggest improvements were seen in the 17th district (3.4% of ballots were not counted in the presidential race in 1996, compared to 0.8% in 2000), the 26th district (3.1% of ballots were not counted in the presidential race in 1996, compared to 0.8% in 2000), and the 18th district (2.9% of ballots were not counted in the presidential race in 1996, compared to 0.8% in 2000).

**3. Precincts with the Largest Undercount Rates Made Dramatic Improvements**

A precinct-level analysis indicates that the precincts that had the highest rates of undercounts in 1996 experienced dramatic improvements in 2000. Within the 17th election district, three precincts had rates of uncounted votes for president that were above 7% in the 1996 election. In all three cases, the rate of uncounted votes was reduced to below 1% in 2000. For example, the undercount rate in the 45th precinct was reduced from 7.3% in 1996 to 0.2% in 2000 -- a reduction of over 95%. Similarly, in the 18th precinct, the undercount rate dropped

from 7.2% in 1996 to 0.3% in 2000. In the 43rd precinct, the undercount rate went from 7.2% in 1996 to zero in 2000.

**4. Even Districts with Increased Turnout Had Low Rates of Uncounted Ballots**

Election experts have speculated that rates of uncounted ballots increase when voters are inexperienced or vote infrequently. But in Detroit, even districts that had increased turnout, often an indicator of inexperienced or infrequent voters, had lower rates of uncounted ballots. For example, in the 18th district, turnout increased by over 1,000 voters (from 13,303 in 1996 to 14,376 in 2000) while the rate of uncounted votes for president decreased from 2.9% to 0.8%. Similarly, in the 6th district, voter turnout increased by 6%, but the rate of uncounted votes for president decreased from 2.3% to 1.0%.

**5. The Number of Uncounted Absentee Votes Also Decreased Dramatically**

Detroit also experienced a reduction in the percentage of absentee ballots that did not show a vote for president. In 1996, 5.2% of all absentee votes -- over one in twenty -- were not counted in the presidential race. In 2000, however, only 1.4% of absentee ballots were not counted.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

This report investigated Detroit's voting reform efforts and their impact on the number of voter undercounts. In 1996, Detroit voters used a punch-card ballot in the presidential election. Before the 2000 election, Detroit switched to an optical scanning system that allows voters to check their ballots, and the city engaged in an intensive voter education campaign. The results of this study indicate that the reform efforts of Detroit election officials had a dramatic impact, reducing the incidence of uncounted ballots by almost two-thirds.